

50% drop in PR passes granted Policy change boosts social cohesion but may affect competitiveness: Experts

Andrea Ong

The Straits Times, 18 Jan 2011



DPM Wong chatting with students from National Junior College, Singapore Polytechnic, Anglo-Chinese Junior College and Anderson Junior College at the Singapore Perspectives 2011 conference yesterday. At the conference, he said a policy change that drew clearer distinctions between the benefits citizens and PRs enjoy "underlines our principle that Singaporeans will enjoy priority over non-citizens". -- ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

THE Government granted only 29,265 permanent resident passes last year, fewer than half of the 59,460 passes given out the year before.

It is also the lowest the PR intake has been in at least five years.

The sharp drop in PRs is a result of the tightening of immigration policy in 2009 to better manage the inflow and quality of new immigrants, said Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng yesterday.

A policy change that drew clearer distinctions between the benefits citizens and PRs enjoy also 'underlines our principle that Singaporeans will enjoy priority over non-citizens', he said at the Singapore Perspectives 2011 conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

The move is a plus for social cohesion but could cost Singapore in terms of competitiveness, experts said.

Marine Parade GRC MP Seah Kian Peng, who was at the conference, said the Government has to strike a balance between growth and cohesion.

'If we go purely for economic growth at all costs, there would clearly be a lot more PRs and foreign workers. But we must ensure the social balance is not tilted,' said Mr Seah, who

heads the Government Parliamentary Committee for Community Development, Youth and Sports.

The 50 per cent drop in PRs 'clearly reflects the Government's concern with grassroots unhappiness', said Dr Gavin Jones from the Asia Research Institute.

But the move to address the discontent over the foreigner influx in recent years may not come without a cost.

One advantage that Singapore has over other Asian countries like South Korea and Japan, which are reluctant to accept immigrants, is its multicultural society historically made up of immigrants, said Dr Jones.

But being less receptive to immigrants could lead to Singapore losing that advantage, he added.

Dr Jones also noted that while most of Singapore's foreign workforce come here on contracts, some do so with hopes of becoming permanent residents and might be discouraged by the tightened PR intake. 'There is the danger of losing some talent,' he said.

But human resource experts said the impact would be felt mainly among the borderline cases - employment pass holders possessing skills which can already be found in Singaporeans.

These tend to be foreigners earning between \$2,500 and \$3,000. Most come from the manufacturing and IT industries, said Mr Josh Goh, assistant director for corporate services of recruitment agency The GMP Group.

On the other hand, life sciences and research are two booming sectors still in need of skilled foreigners.

'If you have the skill sets that Singapore is short of, there's no issue,' said Mr Goh. 'Generally, there's no risk of Singapore losing its attractiveness.'

Dr Ori Sasson, 39, who moved here from Israel in 2002 and became a citizen in 2007, agreed. Singapore is attractive because the economic situation here is better than in many other places, he said.

'There is still a strong demand among people who want to come here because it's better than overseas, especially in sectors like banking,' said Dr Sasson, who founded an IT firm. 'But it's more important to maintain cohesiveness than to worry about losing out on talent.'